

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7208

INFO AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

USCINCSO

AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAN SALVADOR 0193

E.O. 11652 - GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, PGOV, SHUM, ES

SUBJ: THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE AS THE YEAR BEGINS

USCINCSO FOR POLAD

SUMMARY: THIS CABLE DESCRIBES THE OVERALL POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE WHICH HOVERS OVER EL SALVADOR AS 1975 BEGINS. IT IS AN ENVIRONMENT OF DISQUIET AND UNCERTAINTY, IN WHICH CONFIDENCE IN PRESIDENT MOLINA AND HIS GOVERNMENT HAS DECLINED AMONG ALL MAJOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SECTORS. SEVERAL FACTORS ACCOUNT FOR THIS MALAISE: THE MAGNITUDE OF THE NATION'S ENDEMIC ILLS; AN ALREADY DIFFICULT ECONOMIC SITUATION COMPLICATED BY THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS ON A VULNERABLE ECONOMY OF THE WORLDWIDE ECONOMIC STAGFLATION; AND A GENERAL OPINION, BACKED BY EVIDENCE OF GOES BLUNDERS AND MISCALCULATIONS, THAT PRESIDENT MOLINA AND HIS ADMINISTRATION MIGHT LACK THE POLITICAL WHEREWITHALL TO COPE WITH THE RESULTANT PRESSURES. NO SINGLE ISSUE OR POLITICAL FORCE IS BEHIND THE CRITICISM. RATHER AN ACCUMULATION OF EVENTS AND TRENDS HAS LED SOME PEOPLE TO QUESTION, MANY FOR THE FIRST TIME, CONFIDENTIAL

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WHETHER MOLINA CAN FINISH HIS TERM. GOES RELATIONS WITH THE CHURCH,

CAMPESINOS, OPPOSITION PARTIES, OLIGARCHS, AND THE BUSINESS/COMMERCIAL COMMUNITY HAVE DETERIORATED ACROSS THE BOARD. GLIMMERINGS OF DISCONTENT WITH MOLINA HAVE SURFACED EVEN WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT PARTY AND THE MILITARY OFFICER CORPS. WE DO NOT PERCEIVE THE MAKINGS OF AN ABRUPT CHANGE AT THIS TIME, HOWEVER, PRINCIPALLY BECAUSE THE MILITARY OFFICER CORPS DOES NOT APPARENTLY VIEW THE SITUATION IN CRISIS TERMS AND REMAINS LOYAL. (END OF SUMMARY).

1. 1974 ENDED, AND THE NEW YEAR HAS BEGUN, WITH AN ALMOST UNIVERSALLY PERCEIVED SENSE THAT THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SHOULD BE AND THAT FORCES AND PRESSURES ARE IN MOTION WHICH WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY PROVE MORE POWERFUL THAN THE INERTIA TENDING TO MAINTAIN THE GOVERNMENTAL STATUS QUO. WHWHETHER THE INEVITABLE MOVEMENT COMES AS THE RESULT OF AN ABRUPT BREAK WITH TODAY'S PLAYERS AND POLICIES, THAT IS BY A COUP, OR WHETHER THOSE PRESENTLY RESPONSIBLE ARE ABLE TO ALLAY THE PRESSURE IN TIME BY IMPLEMENTING APPROPRIATE MEASURES THAT WILL BE NEEDED TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS, REMAINS TO BE SEEN. WHAT IS DISCERNABLE IS AN ATMOSPHERE OF DISQUIET AND UNCERTAINTY AMONG AMNY, IF NOT MOST, SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL OPINION SECTORS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS AND DURABILITY OF THE PRESEN REGIME. NO SINGLE POLITICAL ACTOR OR OVERRIDING ISSUE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MALAISE, OR STANDS MUCH CHANCE OF PROVOKING THE OUSTER OF PRESIDENT MOLINA. RATHER AN ACCUMULATION OF EVENTS AND TRENDS OVER THE LAST MONTHS HAS CREATED AN IMPRESSION IN MANY PEOPLE'S MINDS THAT PRESIDENT MOLINA AND HIS TEAM ARE EITHER UNWILLING AND/OR UNABLE TO DESIGN, MUCH LESS IMPLEMENT, AN EFFECTIVE OVERALL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRATEGY TO DEAL WITH THE NATION'S ILLS. HALFWAY THROUGH HIS FIVE YEAR TERM, MOLINA HAS YET TO IDENTIFY SATISFACTORILY FOR PUBLIC OPINION OR DEMONSTRATE WHAT HIS REGIME STANDS FOR BEYOND A VERBAL COMMITMENT TO SOMEHOW MAKE "A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL SALVADORANS." THE RESULTANT IMPRESSION IS OF A GOVERNMENT ADRIFT, BUFFETTED BY LITTLE UNDRSTOOD CURRENTS AND PRESSURES FROM ALL SIDES, WITH THE CAPTAIN SPENDING MOST OF HIS TIME BAILING OUT THE VESSEL, AND TRYING TO KEEP THE CREW AND OWNERS REASONABLY CONTENT, AND LITTLE TIME IN IDENTIFYING WHERE HE IS TRYING TO GO AND HOW BEST GO GET THERE. THE IMMEDIATE PROBLEM IS THAT SOME OF THE CREW AND BACKERS ARE FOR THE FIRST TIME SERIOUSLY DISCUSSING A CHANGE OF SKIPPERS.

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2. THE LAST DAYS OF 1974 SAW THE MOLINA GOVERNMENT FACING UNPRECEDENTED CRITICISM AND PRESSURES FOR ACTION. A GOODLY PORTION WAS GENERATED BY PROBLEMS BEYOND THE EFFECTIVE REACH OF THE GOES, SUCH AS THE WORLD ECONOMIC SITUATION AND PETROLEUM SQUEEZE. BUT THE MOST DAMAGING CRITICISM STEMMED FROM ATTRIBUTION TO THE GOES OF SERIOUS DOMESTIC MISCALCULATIONS AND BLUNDERS. THE OPINION IS CIRCULATING AMONG ALL SECTORS - FROM THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY, TO THE COFFEE AND COTTON GROWERS, TO POLITICAL OPPOSI-

TION AND CHURCH LEADERSHIPS, AND FINALLY TO SOME AMONG THE PRESIDENT'S FORMERLY MOST CONSTANT CONSTITUENCIES (THE MILITARY OFFICER CORPS AND THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT PARTY - PCN-) THAT PRESIDENT MOLINA, WHILE A DECENT AND SINCERE PERSON, IS SIMPLY NOT POLITICALLY ADEPT ENOUGH TO GOVERN THE NATION THROUGH THE HARD TIMES AHEAD. THE MISSING INGREDIENT IN MOST SUCH ANALYSES IS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO MOLINA.

3. HIGHLIGHTING THE DETERIORATION OF MOLINA'S POSITION, A DATT SOURCE HAS REPORTED THAT THE LAST HOURS OF 1974 WITNESSED A SERIOUS PLOT BY DISSIDENTS TO FORCEABLY REMOVE MOLINA. IT IS PERHAPS OF EQUAL IMPORTANCE THAT IT NEVER GOT OFF THE GROUND. ALTHOUGH DETAILS REMAIN SKETCHY AND EXCEEDINGLY HARD TO COME BY, DATT SOURCE REPORTS THAT A SMALL GROUP OF OFFICERS EXILED IN 1972 FOR INVOLVEMENT IN THE ABORTIVE MARCH COUP AGAINST SANCHEZ HERNANDEZ, PRESUMABLY WITH THE SUPPORT OF DISSATISFIED ELEMENTS WITHIN THE ACTIVE DUTY OFFICER CORPS DUE FOR IMMINENT RETIREMENT AND FINANCIALLY BACKED BY DISGRUNTLED OLIGARCHS, PLANNED A GOLPE FOR THE NIGHT OF DECEMBER 30. OUR BEST INFORMATION IS THAT NO OVERT ACTS TOOK PLACE, THE PLOTTERS CALLING IT OFF WHEN SECURITY FORCES AROUND THE PRESIDENT WERE INCREASED WHICH SUGGESTED THAT THEIR PLOT WAS DISCOVERED. THE DATT SOURCE (SEE IR 6829-006-75) REPORTED THAT AN ACTIVE DUTY CORONEL (COL. EFRAIN TEJADA, COMMANDER FIRST BRIGADE) WHO HAD BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE INSTEAD REVEALED THE PLOT TO THE GOVERNMENT. ALTHOUGH NO DETAILS OF EITHER THE ABORTED COUP ATTEMPT, OR RETALIATION AGAINST THOSE INVOLVED, HAVE LEAKED OUT, THERE IS AWARENESS WITHIN MANY SECTORS THAT "SOMETHING HAPPENED". IN THE ABSENCE OF FACTS, THE POLITICAL RUMOR MILLS HAVE PRODUCED ENDLESS VARIATIONS ON THE COUP THEME - EACH WITH DIFFERENT PRINCIPALS AND OBJECTIVES.

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AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SAN SALVADOR 0193

4. A SURVEY OF THE VARIOUS SECTORS REVEALS SIGNIFICANT DETERIORATION IN CONFIDENCE IN THE PRESIDENT. IN THE RURAL AREAS, TRADITIONAL STRONGHOLD OF THE PCN, THE GOVERNMENT IS IN SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES. A SERIES OF MALADROIT MOVES HAS SUCCEEDED IN ALIENATING BOTH THE LARGE LANDOWNERS WHO PRODUCE CASH CROPS FOR EXPORT AND CALIM THAT GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE AND INCOMPETENCE IN THE MARKETING THEREOF HAS BROUGHT THEM TO THE BRINK OF DISASTER, AND THE LANDLESS CAMPESINOS WHO ARE TIRED OF WAITING FOR CONCRETE STEPS IN THE LONG PROMISED "AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION" PROGRAM. THE LATTER'S ALIENATION AND SUSPICION INCREASED WHEN THEY INTERPRETED THE NOVEMBER 29 CLASH AT LA CAYETANA (SAN SALVADOR 4977) AS A VALID INDICATION OF HOW THE GOES PLANS TO TREAT THEM IF THEY BECOME SERIOUS IN THEIR DEMANDS. THE MARCH BY 10-15,000 CAMPESINO MEMBERS OF THE UNION COMUNAL SALVADORENA (UCS) (SAN SALVADOR 5001), WHILE WELL HANDLED BY MOLINA WHEN HE PERSONALLY APPEARED BEFORE THEM AND REITERATED HIS GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO REFORM, NEVERTHELESS EXPOSES THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF HIS POSITION. WHAT CAN MOLINA REALISTICALLY GIVE THE CAMPESINOS, WHEN HE IS ALREADY VILIFIED BY THE LANDED RICH FOR HAVING "RUINED THE COUNTRY BY
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TAKING A READICAL TURN TO THE LEFT" WITH SUCH RELATIVELY MODEST MEASURES AS A MINIMUM WAGE OF 2.5 TO 3.0 COLONES PER DAY (\$1.00-1.20) FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS? ON THE OTHER HAND, HOW LONG CAN THE CAMPESINOS BE EXPECTED TO ENDURE PRESENT CONDITION WHILE HEARING REPEATED PROMISES OF WHAT THE GOVERNMENT IS ABOUT TO DO TO IMPROVE THEIR LOT. (SEE SAN SALVADOR 5001 FOR DESCRIPTION OF UCS LEADERSHIP'S INCREASING SELF CONFIDENCE AND IMPATIENCE).

5. OTHER POLITICAL AGGREGATES CLAIM THEIR OWN REASONS FOR HAVING LOST CONFIDENCE IN THE ABILITIES AND/OR GOOD FAITH OF THE GOVERNMENT. THE CHURCH, NOW MORE THAN EVER HESITANT TO BECOME TOO CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE REGIME, OPENLY DECRIED THE LA CAYETANA INCIDENT AS A SERIOUS INFRINGEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS. THE GOES, IN TURN, HAS BLAMED ACTIVIST MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY AS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INCIDENT AND BLUNTLY WARNED THE CHURCH TO STAY OUT OF POLITICAL MATTERS. THIS ONLY FURTHER EXACERBATED THE GOVERNMENT'S PROBLEMS WITH THE CLERGY. THE BUSINESS SECTOR, IN THE PAST USUALLY TOLERANT OF MOLINA OUT OF APPRECIATION FOR HIS FIRM

DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN PUBLIC ORDER AND POLITICAL STABILITY, IS INCLINED NOW TO DISCUSS THE APPARENTLY GROWING INCIDENCE OF BUREAUCRATIC CORRUPTION. BUSINESSMEN, AND OTHERS, ALSO HAVE BEEN SHAKEN BY THE RECENT SERIES OF BOMBINGS (SAN SALVADOR 5068, 5085) AND RASH OF FIRES IN CAPITAL MARKETS AND FACTORIES. MANY ARE ALL TOO READY TO ASSUME THESE ACTS ARE THE WORK OF LEFTIST TERRORISTS AND ARE BEGINNING TO WONDER IF MOLINA IS CAPABLE OF HOLDING THE LID ON SUCH ACTIVITIES.

6. SUCH FEELINGS OF UNEASINESS ARE EVIDENTLY CONTAGIOUS. THEY HAVE RECENTLY SURFACED WITHIN THE HITHERTO MOST UNCRITICAL OF SECTORS, THE PRESIDENT'S OWN PCN PARTY. FOR THE FIRST TIME, SOME MEMBERS OF THE PCN LEADERSHIP ARE PRIVATELY QUESTIONING MOLINA'S ABILITY TO COMPLETE HIS TERM. THERE IS GROWING EVIDENCE THAT THE PARTY REALIZES THAT, IF PRESENT TRENDS CONTINUE, IT WOULD BE SOUNDLY BEATEN IN A REASONABLY HONEST ELECTION. THOSE WILLING TO DISCUSS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE PARTY AGREE THAT IT IS IN DIRE STRAITS AND THINGS ARE LIKELY TO GET WORSE AS THE SCRAMBLE TO SELECT A SUCCESSOR TO MOLINA GETS UNDER WAY PRIOR TO THE 1977 ELECTIONS.

7. THE ONE SECTOR WHERE THERE IS CONFLICTING EVIDENCE AS TO THE PRESENT IMAGE OF THE PRESIDENT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE, THE CONFIDENTIAL

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MILITARY OFFICER CORPS. ON THE ONE SIDE IS SUCH EVIDENCE AS: (1) THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE, A POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR TO MOLINA, APPARENTLY REMAINS LOYAL TO HIS PRESIDENT; (2) THE COLONEL WHO BLEW THE LID ON THE DECEMBER 30 COUP PLOTTING AW HIS OWN AND HIS NATION'S BEST INTERESTS IN DENOUNCING THE CONSPIRATORS; AND (3) OFFICERS OF THE "GROUP OF 44", THOSE CAPTAINS WHO ARE SAID TO BE THE BACKBONE OF MOLINA'S STRENGTH AMONG MID-LEVEL OFFICERS AND WHO ARE IN IMPORTANT TROOP COMMAND POSITIONS, REPORTEDLY DEMONSTRATED THEIR CONTINUED ALLEGIANCE TO MOLINA DURING THE NIGHT OF THE ABORTED COUP. ON THE OTHER SIDE ARE THE REPORTS THAT: (1) DISGRUNTLED MILITARY OFFICERS WERE AMONG THOSE INVOLVED IN THE COUP PLANNING; AND (2) THOSE WITH GOOD CONNECTIONS IN THE MILITARY ARE HEARING, FOR THE FIRST TIME, COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE PRESIDENT'S HANDLING OF HIS OFFICE AND SUGGESTIONS THAT HIS CONTINUED PRESENCE IS NOT INDISPENSABLE.

8. COMMENT: IT IS DIFFICULT TO ACCESS WHAT MIGHT BE FOMENTING WITHIN, OR WILL FINALLY EMERGE FROM, THE UNSETTLED ATMOSPHERE DESCRIBED ABOVE. WE DO NOT PERCEIVE THAT THE SINGLE MOST CRITICAL FACTOR FOR A SUCCESSFUL COUP - OVERWHELMING SUPPORT AT THE TROOP COMMAND LEVEL WITHIN THE ARMY - EXISTS AS YET. THAT NO SIGNIFICANT BODY OF OPINION IS COALESCING AROUND A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO MOLINA, ALSO SPEAKS WELL FOR HIS CHANCES OF REMAINING IN OFFICE. DESPITE THE UNEASINESS AND GRUMBLINGS, THERE IS CONSIDERABLE APPRECIATION OF THE ENORMITY OF THE PROBLEMS THAT

MOLINA FACES AND THE FAILURE OF PAST GOVERNMENTS TO MAKE HEADWAY AGAINST THEM. IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT MANY OF THE GRUMBLERS DO NOT DIRECT THEIR CRITICISM AT MOLINA HIMSELF, BUT AT THOSE FROM WHOM HE GETS ADVICE. ILLUSTRATIVE OF THIS WAS THE PURPOSE BEHIND THE UCS RALLY WHICH WAS TO FORCE A DIRECT TALK WITH THE PRESIDENT,

AND NOT GO THROUGH THE ADVISORS. MANY FEEL THAT "IF THE PRESIDENT ONLY KNEW" WHAT THE REAL SITUATION WAS, AND DID NOT RELY ON INCOMPETENT AND SELF-SEEKING ADVISORS, HE WOULD PERFORM BETTER. NEVERTHELESS, THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEMS MOLINA FACES, PLUS THE LIMITED AND DETERIORATING NATURE OF HIS POLITICAL BASE, MILITATE AGAINST HIS GOVERNMENT BEING ABLE TO TAKE ADEQUATE INITIATIVES IN ATTACKING THE NATION'S ENDEMIC ILLS, OR THOSE OF MORE RECENT AND EXOGENOUS ORIGIN, WITHOUT RECOURSE TO COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE AUTHORITARIAN MEASURES.

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